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“We kind of created our own scene”: a geography of the Brixton Rebel Dykes

Milo Miller 

The ‘Rebel Dykes’ scene broadly refers to a network of punk anarchist feminists who first came together in the 1980s and were primarily based in squats in the south London neighbourhood of Brixton. As literature on lesbian urban geographies has demonstrated, lesbian identities, histories and communities are brought into being, negotiated and resisted in complex, shifting and specific spatial and temporal ways. Considering ‘lesbian’ and ‘dyke’ together while holding them in tension, this article contributes to this literature. Drawing on interviews with Rebel Dykes and their associates, this article assembles a geography of the Rebel Dykes by attending to spatial, material and infrastructural processes through which the Rebel Dykes—as a scene, a collective, a project—came to be. Formulations of dyke, lesbian and feminist, this article argues, make place and space and are themselves made in and through place and space; it is thus imperative to consider them in relation to and as contingent on the broader, specific histories, relations and spatialities in which they unfold. Further, in exploring anarchist feminist spatialities in 1980s London, this article engages with locations, histories, dynamics and political lineages under-explored in academic literature on British feminism and on squatting in England.

Keywords **British feminism, Brixton, lesbian geographies, London, Rebel Dykes, squatting**

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Introduction

This article assembles a modest geography of the 'Rebel Dykes' scene, which broadly refers to a network of punk anarchist feminists who first came together in the 1980s and were primarily based in squats in the south London neighbourhood of Brixton.¹ Although recent years have seen significant explorations of the Rebel Dykes scene, the *spatialities* of the Rebel Dykes—especially those in Brixton—have received scant attention.² This article focuses on some of these in order to attend to the spatial, material and infrastructural processes through which subjectivities and political projects are formed and negotiated. In pursuing this aim, this article begins to answer Alexander Vasudevan's calls to develop an '*historical perspective* that re-imagines the city as a living archive of alternative knowledges, materials and resources'; to attend to the '*making* of alternative urban spaces and infrastructures'; and to emphasise the key role that reproductive and '*emotional labour* plays in transforming radical political goals into shared spaces of action and solidarity, care and generosity' (Vasudevan 2015a, 202, emphases in original). Finally, this article engages with spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles which academic literature on British feminism and on squatting in England have overlooked.

Historical and geographical work on squatting in England has largely concentrated on a narrow range of collectives and squats in London in the late 1960s and the 1970s.³ The ways in which squatting has intersected with anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and queer struggles and politics have been under-examined in this literature; further, while it has often been noted that squatting in London has enabled people to collectively articulate deeply transformative geographies, the *making* of these remains largely under-explored (Vasudevan 2017; Wall 2017).⁴ Here, I build on recent, important interventions by Amy Tobin (2017a; 2017b) and Christine Wall (2017) which focus on radical feminist politics, projects and spaces: Tobin has pieced together a history of a radical feminist art exhibition and installation in a squatted house in the south London area of Vauxhall in the spring of 1974; Wall's account dwells on a community of radical feminists, many of them lesbians, who squatted in north London's Hackney area in the 1970s and 1980s. As anarchist feminists, the Rebel Dykes were often and explicitly in conflict with and against radical feminists; this article thus contributes explorations of feminist politics, collective projects and squatted spaces in great tension with those explored by Wall and Tobin.

Over the last three decades, literature on lesbian urban geographies has yielded explorations (primarily focused on North America and the UK) of how lesbians negotiate, rework and create places which take multiple forms and (re) produce particular power relations—whether relatively fixed physical urban sites or territories (including neighbourhoods, clusters of lesbian households and social spaces in gay villages) or more fluid and ephemeral networks (Browne 2020; Browne and Ferreira 2015; Forstie 2020; Valentine 2000).⁵ Crucially, this literature has demonstrated how lesbian identities, histories and communities come into being in specific spatial and temporal ways; and that there has thus (necessarily) not been a fixed referent of 'lesbian'—whether in lesbian geographies or more broadly (Browne and Ferreira 2015).⁶ This article

draws on and contributes to this literature, by attending to spatial processes through which the Rebel Dykes—as a scene, a collective, a project—have come into being (which entails considering 'lesbian' and 'dyke' together while also holding them in tension).

I first encountered the Rebel Dykes in 2017, as I was writing a PhD thesis on squatting in Brixton from the 1970s to the 2010s. The reflections presented here draw primarily on 6 original interviews with Rebel Dykes and some of their associates, which were conducted between July 2017 and February 2018. I also draw on recordings of two walking tours in Brixton with members of the Rebel Dykes (the first on 23 September 2017; the second on 7 October 2018), which I was asked to co-lead in order to contribute my broader knowledge of Brixton's squatting histories.⁷ I have given pseudonyms to everyone I interviewed; I have not, however, anonymised material which was *explicitly*, from the beginning, produced (with the knowledge and consent of those involved) to be made publicly available and widely circulated.

'Where the fuck are we? It's like we didn't exist!'

The term 'Rebel Dykes' was initially deployed in October 2014 by Siobhan Fahey as she began to gather an archive and plan a film about a 'loose grouping... of young punk women on the edge of society' that she had been part of in south London from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s (Fahey, Shanahan, and Williams 2021, n.p.). Although the term is therefore a relatively recent development, it has been embraced retroactively as a collective descriptor by many who were also part of this scene. It became clear to Fahey that—as she put it to me—she was 'not the only one who thinks, "Where the fuck are we? It's like we didn't exist!"'. Soon, she had gathered a small trove of photographs, music recordings and videos; then, with no prior experience of filmmaking, she began to explore the possibility of making a documentary film. What has now become 'the Rebel Dykes History Project' (Stokes 2021) has led to the organising of a number of walking tours and the setting up of accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; in September 2019, it was announced that the growing Rebel Dykes archive would be housed at the Bishopsgate Institute.⁸ The project also included the 'Rebel Dykes Art & Archive Show', which, between June and September 2021, exhibited the work of Rebel Dykes alongside that of younger queer artists.⁹ The Fahey-produced *Rebel Dykes* film was released across the UK in late 2021, after premiering at BFI Flare in March 2021 (Hewitson 2021).

As explained to me by several Rebel Dykes in interviews, the Rebel Dykes History Project is being pursued in large part to challenge common understandings and narratives of lesbian and feminist politics in the 1980s; these are understandings and narratives which tend to, for example, segment feminism into clearly divided periods as well as into fixed political positions and subjectivities, thus drastically limiting how feminism's complex histories and presents can be thought (Hemmings 2011; Hesford 2013; Jolly 2019; McBean 2016).¹⁰ The Rebel Dykes I interviewed framed this historical and archival project as a direct response to the upsurge in anti-sex worker and anti-trans discourse and organising that has taken place in the United Kingdom in recent years;¹¹ in

this context, they emphasised that the Rebel Dykes count among them people who, over time, have come to identify as non-binary and as trans men.¹²

In my interviews with Rebel Dykes, 'dyke' was used, in many instances, as very distinct from 'lesbian': As Kris (a pseudonym) told me, 'We were dykes. We were not fucking lesbians'. The term 'lesbians', for her, had seemed 'too wet ... too straight and boring'.¹³ In some formulations, 'dyke' was used as shorthand for a coalitional array of sexual- and gender-dissident women that included some heterosexual women. 'Not all the women involved in the scene were dykes ... [in the sense that] not everyone was a lesbian' Roberta (a pseudonym), told me—with 'lesbian', in her formulation, referring exclusively to women who have sex with women.¹⁴ In understanding 'dyke' as being more expansive than some understandings of the term 'lesbian', other Rebel Dykes I interviewed explicitly connected it to some formulations of 'queer': 'A lot of us were queer - most of us were', Demeter (a pseudonym) told me. '[Though w]e didn't call ourselves queer because the term didn't exist'.¹⁵ Others, while recognising such resonances, resisted being labelled as queer—they felt 'dyke' indexes specific histories, politics and projects which cannot easily be accounted for within (and which can often be subsumed by) 'queer'.¹⁶ Importantly, in many of these interviews, 'lesbian', 'dyke' and 'queer' were also used interchangeably; it was instructive to hear one Rebel Dyke identify as a lesbian, bisexual, a dyke and as queer—and in some instances several of these positions at once—depending on which political context, time periods and spaces of her life she was referring to. Terms such as 'lesbian' and 'dyke'—as well as queer and bisexual—cannot, then, be understood as stable or coherent categories. They are capacious, fluid, at times overlapping and at times opposing terms which are formulated, negotiated, deployed and resisted in specific spatial, temporal and political contexts—they both *make* place and space and are themselves *made* in and through place and space (Browne 2020; Forstie 2020; Gregson and Rose 2000).

From Greenham to Brixton

Several Rebel Dykes first crossed paths as teenagers at the then-internationally-famous Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, England (Lloyd 2017). Some had been thrown out of their parents' homes or had left them to escape oppressive situations—for example, Demeter moved to Greenham just before her 17th birthday. As she explained, 'I wanted to get away from my family. I actually tried to have myself taken into care, but it never worked!'

The camp began when a group of women—calling themselves 'Women for Life on Earth'—marched from Cardiff to the Royal Air Force base in Greenham Common to protest the storing of nuclear cruise missiles there. They set up camp outside the base in September 1981 (the start of a long-term occupation), making the camp women-only in February 1982 (Cresswell 1994; Dunster 2022). As Sasha Roseneil has noted, dominant narratives of Greenham characterise the women who lived there as 'dull and dowdy ... not to be taken seriously as political actors' or as "militant feminists and burly lesbians" who hung tampons on the fence whilst pursuing an agenda of "man-hating" and sexual liaisons with each other' (Roseneil 2000, 2). Further, as Gail Lewis wrote in 1985,

many Black British feminists had reason to see Greenham as emblematic of a British peace movement which 'is... yet more of the same racist, nationalist, xenophobic... and heterosexist... attitudes which plague left politics in Britain' (Lewis 1988, 271). These are indeed some of the stories to be told about Greenham—Roseneil contrasts these with her readings of Greenham as the then 'cutting edge of political action and cultural change' and as 'queer *avant la lettre*' (Roseneil 2000, 3-5)—and they are stories which the Rebel Dykes themselves often tell. Importantly, Greenham was also a 'training camp [for] cutting fences, blockading' and trespassing into the base for the 'young, drinking lesbians [not] into that... Housewives for Peace... image' (Fahey, Shanahan, and Williams 2021, n.p.) who would become the Rebel Dykes through the deployment of these practices in Brixton (Greenham, Demeter was careful to note during our interview, 'was a form of squatting'). As Ronnie (a pseudonym) told me, '[t]hose women', having gone through that experience, 'all seemed to leave Greenham at around the same time, and ... a lot of them settled in Brixton'. For several of them, it was only once they arrived in south London that they began to dress in the punk/SM style which has become emblematic of the Rebel Dykes—an aesthetic markedly different from (and in great political tension with) that of many of the women they shared space with at Greenham.

In the mid-1980s, when the Rebel Dykes began to congregate in Brixton—a district in the London borough of Lambeth—the area had long been, in the white English popular imagination, 'a name synonymous with poverty and its attendant social problems' in deeply racialised ways (Benson 1981, 24). After the passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act, Brixton became home to arrivals from the Caribbean and West Africa (Mavrommatis 2011). There, they found relatively cheap rents; these rents, however, came with poor housing conditions which, over the years, Lambeth Council did 'nothing whatsoever' to address (Burney 1967, 113).⁴⁷ This long-standing neglect was compounded by planning blight resulting from the Greater London Council's Greater London Development Plan (Burney 1967). The plan identified areas of London—Lambeth among them—containing large swathes of housing unfit for human habitation (Wall 2017). Demolition was deemed the most pragmatic method of addressing this; once demolished, the aim was for unfit housing to be replaced, for the most part, with new flats (Wall 2017). Entire residential streets in Brixton were thus served by Lambeth Council with compulsory purchase orders, so as to demolish them (Anning and Simpson 1980; Piper 1996). Lambeth Council's redevelopment plans, however, relied on private investment which did not materialise; houses which were not demolished were left abandoned (Anning and Simpson 1980). During this period, Lambeth was in the top five London boroughs in terms of vacant property rates, and had not only one of the largest populations of any of the Greater London Boroughs but also the highest population density south of the Thames (Benson 1981). This confluence of factors was such that Lambeth became one of the most heavily squatted boroughs in London, with approximately 3,000 squatters by 1976 (Cockburn 1977; Ferreri and Vasudevan 2019). Brixton became home to a variety of political groups and projects based in squats—including the Brixton Gay Community, the Brixton Black Women's Group and Sabarr Books; many such 1970s-founded projects were on the wane by the time the Rebel Dykes

arrived, though a number of residential squats remained (and other projects were set up).¹⁸

As the 1980s began, saturation policing and the stop-and-searching of Black people in Brixton had long been routine; this led to large-scale confrontations which took place between the 10th and 12th of April 1981, the 15th of July 1981, and between the 28th and the 30th of September 1985.¹⁹ 'I moved [to Brixton] immediately after the second big [uprising in 1985]', Demeter recalled. 'It felt a bit like ... a war zone.' Ronnie described the area as 'vibrant[,] cheap, and [not] at all gentrified—it was a shithole, basically. It suited everybody!' These histories and geographies made it possible for the Rebel Dykes to come together as—indeed, to collectively become—the Rebel Dykes: as Ronnie told me, several of the Rebel Dykes settled in Brixton *because* 'there were a lot of squats to be had – a lot!'. More broadly, as multi-disciplinary artist Carol Leeming has recalled elsewhere, 1980s Brixton was home to 'the most amazing Black artists of that time' and a 'social and political scene that was absolutely incredible' (Su, Smartt, and Leeming 2017, 140).

'... their own ecosystem'

'More often than not', as noted by Vasudevan, 'to squat is to give form to a basic need for housing and shelter' (Vasudevan 2015b, 340). As Demeter explained to me, 'most of the squatting' done by the Rebel Dykes 'was, really, done for housing because, obviously, we all had a need for it'. Through and beyond this need, what Wall has noted with regard to squatting in 1970s and 1980s Hackney—that it 'provided the physical and spatial infrastructure for ... feminist activism' (Wall 2017, 93)—was also true south of the Thames in the mid-1980s and early 1990s for the Rebel Dykes. 'Squatting was an incredibly political, practical and liberating thing', Ronnie told me. 'It enabled people to form communities ... whether they were musical, political, sexual – whatever'. For the Rebel Dykes, it enabled and was part of what Ronnie described as 'their own ecosystem'.²⁰

Efforts to think and live social and political alternatives—to create new ecosystems, we might say—cannot be abstracted from their material and infrastructural geographies. The *assembling* of these geographies—a 'process that depends on a contingent set of relations between bodies, spaces, and materials'—has been observed to foster and be enacted through the reworking or creation of modes of association, action and subjectivity (McFarlane and Vasudevan 2014, 261; Tanyildiz et al. 2021). It is therefore instructive to attend to *how* these geographies are made—to the work of trespassing, mending, repairing, adjusting and adapting, for example—and to what they enable.

During our interview, Demeter fondly remembered—and explained in detail—how she used to get past a variety of locks which squatters encountered in the 1980s. 'It was relatively easy ... to find new places [to squat]' she told me; once past the locks, however, these places 'were in sort of, like, *really* varying states of liveability'. In light of this, during her time in Brixton she 'did a 6-month building maintenance course'. 'I got into it because of the squatting', she explained; in the course, she learned to 'do basic electrics, and quite a lot of basic plumbing'. With these new skills—acquired to repair and adapt the

spaces she inhabited—she ‘helped a lot of women [in the Rebel Dykes scene] squat places’ in Brixton, further bringing the scene into being. For Sinéad (a pseudonym), the reconfiguration of the spatialities of a squat she lived in was intertwined with explorations of collective modes of living beyond ideals of the nuclear family: ‘[At] 13 Brailsford Road ... there were two rooms downstairs and a kitchen upstairs’, she explained, ‘so I taught myself plumbing and gas plumbing, and swapped them over ... then knocked the two rooms together so we had a big living room kitchen’. Once this space had been opened up, one of the Rebel Dykes Sinéad lived with ‘made a round table ... [based on] the sort of idea that [for us, as anarchist feminists, having] no hierarchy was important.’ Such experiments with the built environment, politics and collectivities point to the ways in which the spatial and the political are co-constituted, demanding to be understood as processes which *materialise* that which they seek to enact (Vasudevan 2015c).

The spaces through which the Rebel Dykes came together encompassed not just homes but also a range of communal spaces. Among these was ‘a squatted café ... where we all took it in turns to cook in’, Demeter recalled. At the time, ‘quite a few of the women ... [had] young children, and they were very young themselves – like, 18 or 19’, Sinéad told me. ‘Childcare was a big issue ... As a response to that we set up a [squatted] crèche [at 24 Brailsford Road]’. A key consideration in the setting up of this crèche, as Sinéad remembers it, was to extend to mothers the opportunity to go out partying: ‘I think it was particularly an evening crèche, because the idea was that women need to go out, so that’s when people need babysitters.’²¹ Concurrently, several Rebel Dykes desired, as Fish put it in the *Rebel Dykes* film, ‘what the gay men had access to: places to have sex’—and they often fulfilled this desire through squatting. As Ronnie told me, ‘If you want to have a sex party, you need a venue. Unless you can hire one, what are you going to do? You squat it.’ ‘A lot of people didn’t work’, Sinéad told me, ‘and so often you would just spend your days going from squat to squat—and on the way painting a banner, maybe having sex, maybe flirting with somebody, and certainly having lots and lots of cups of tea’. All of these activities, she explained, were part of a process of ‘learning, really ... about feminism and anarchism. It might have just looked like gossiping, but we were reading books on race, and feminism and anarchism, and talking about them ... The amount of drinking and talking and planning and dreaming that we did!’

At the time, Sinéad emphasised, the Rebel Dykes tended to be ‘young, uneducated ... you know, living in squats or homeless’ (other Rebel Dykes in the film characterise those in the scene at the time as ‘working class’, ‘poor’ and ‘on the street’). Some, Sinéad noted, had ‘drug problems’; more broadly, the Rebel Dykes counted among people who were ‘quite vulnerable’ in a range of ways—including some of the young mothers who depended on the crèche. In order to address this beyond the crèche, the Rebel Dykes—many of them teenagers—organised a range of vital quotidian practices of care and solidarity. Sinéad, for example, remembered breaking her leg at one point; in response, several of the Rebel Dykes set up a rota to ensure she was cared for throughout her recovery. Recalling ‘some of the women that had either run away from home or been forced from home’, Ivette (a pseudonym)—who was not herself a squatter, a punk or an anarchist, but spent much of her time with the Rebel

Dykes—explained that the Rebel Dykes ‘were very good at helping people out – taking people in, and putting them back out in one piece’. Having witnessed this, she told me, she had ‘a lot of time for the Rebel Dykes’. These comings together—in caring and nurturing, in intimacy, around tables, in co-learning, in collective explorations of pleasure, in asserting themselves in their immediate built environment—demand to be understood as examples of the ‘bonds of care’ which, as Tanyildiz et al. (2021) remind us, ‘are a central ethic and need within social reproduction’ (7). ‘Social reproduction’, they argue, is ‘heavily implicated in subjectivity formation in that it comprises the embodied material social practices of those engaging in both the material and emotional activities and relations that bring everyday life into being’ (Tanyildiz et al. 2021, 7). It is through these bonds of care, through these spaces and through this bringing of everyday life into being—through this *labour*—that a ‘loose grouping of young punk women’ *became* the Rebel Dykes, as retrospectively named. In attending to the Rebel Dykes’ practices of care and solidarity, however, it is imperative not to *romanticise* them—these were, crucially, *survival* strategies which must be understood as *overdetermined* by the kinds of violence, uncertainty and disposability which characterised Britain under Thatcher (expressed through, among other mechanisms, the enactment of laws—indeed, as an unnamed Rebel Dyke says in voice-over in the film: ‘We were a community because there were so many laws made against us’). The Rebel Dykes’ practices of care and solidarity demand, instead, to be understood as ‘a provisional and precarious openness to the possibilities of assembling and developing other alternative urbanisms out of the very matter and stuff of inequality, displacement and dispossession’ (Vasudevan 2015b, 349).

‘God knows what they made of me.’

As Kath Browne has noted, ‘[l]esbians have been shown to create space, combat social injustices and reconstitute public spaces in subtle and embodied ways through dress, music, [and] hair’ (Browne 2020, 365). The Rebel Dykes’ shared aesthetic—which Ronnie described to me as ‘very much punky, and angry, and, like, “Baaaaaaaah! Don’t fuck with us!”’—could certainly be said to have functioned in the ways Browne suggests (though perhaps not ‘subtly’). Indeed, this aesthetic was an integral part of the ‘sexual and gender liberations’ (to use Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira’s 2015 term) which the Rebel Dykes agitated for. ‘[S]exual and gender liberations’ must be considered ‘in relation to the place where they occur’, however (Browne and Ferreira 2015, 2). With this in mind, the tensions and negotiations which the Rebel Dykes’ aesthetic gave rise to in Brixton—a hard-fought site of Black resistance against racist violence—must be attended to.

During our interview, Ivette recalled how, before she encountered the Rebel Dykes, she ‘ended up being part of a collective [of women of colour] that ran [a] women’s club [night] at the South London Women’s Centre on [Brixton’s] Acre Lane’. A wide variety of groups attended the club night: ‘There was the Revolutionary Communist Party, out of Villa Road ... There was a Black women’s group, they had the Irish Women’s Group, you know, the South American—there

were lots of different... alternative groups'. Still, she noted, the South London Women's Centre itself appeared to her to be 'run predominantly by white, middle-class women, who'd all been to university and saw themselves as being these rebel lefties, but [weren't] really'. Ivette had first frequented the centre in order to meet lesbians; often, however, she felt patronised by the women there. It was around this time, she recalls, that the Rebel Dykes first 'rocked up'. Ivette noted that 'a lot of women of colour [attending the club night] at the time... didn't really like the [Rebel Dykes'] image', because elements of it—combined with the fact that 'probably 95% of [the Rebel Dykes at that time] were white'—'reminded them of something that they usually connected to fascism'. ('God knows what they made of me', Ronnie told me, being Black herself and having embraced that aesthetic.) Ivette herself had not felt threatened by the Rebel Dykes' aesthetic: 'I'm from Nottingham', she told me. 'The punk era came and went, but we were all involved in... the music and so it wasn't really that big a deal for me'. Over time, Ivette emphasised, many of the women of colour at the club night, upon learning about the Rebel Dykes' politics, 'changed their views' and 'got along really, really well' with them: 'They knew how to drink [and] how to party, but still had politics in their heads [and] knew how to campaign', she offered as an explanation. What felt significant to Ivette was that—in contrast to her experience of the scene around the South London Women's Centre—the Rebel Dykes 'were inclusive without being patronising'. She attributed this in large part to the Rebel Dykes being working class, like herself. Living in nearby Stockwell, Ivette began spending 'quite a lot of [her] social hours at the Rebel Dykes squat parties'. In light of studies of lesbian spaces which have noted the exclusion of working class lesbians from middle-class lesbian spaces in the UK (Taylor 2008), Ivette's emphasis on questions of class with regard to both her alienation from the South London Women's Centre and her sense of belonging with the Rebel Dykes is significant. Her memories of how other women of colour initially perceived the Rebel Dykes' claiming of space in Brixton, however, is a reminder that it is imperative to carefully consider sexual and gender liberations in relation to and as contingent on the broader, specific histories, relations and spatialities in which they unfold.

The Rebel Dykes' spaces and coming together in Brixton must also be understood as defined *against* (however ambivalently, permeably and provisionally) other feminist and lesbian politics and spaces of that time, and the kinds of belonging and exclusion they were formed through (the South London Women's Centre among them: 'I never, *ever* set foot in there, myself', Ronnie explained to me. 'It was literally two worlds, and I preferred [the Rebel Dykes]'). The Rebel Dykes found themselves in serious and long-lasting conflicts with certain sections of the radical feminist and lesbian scenes—conflicts which broadly fit the configurations of what have come to be understood as the feminist and/or lesbian 'sex wars' of the 1980s and 1990s (around pornography, sadomasochism, sex work and trans inclusivity, for example) (Dunster 2022). 'There was a real fault line in the lesbian community at the time', Demeter explained, '[between] the feminists who nowadays would be considered more... like, TERFs [trans-exclusive radical feminists]²²... and other feminists, like us... [who] would be more likely to be sex workers, or into SM. That kind of thing'. These political conflicts had significant spatial dimensions: Although

the Rebel Dykes tended to live ‘in women-only houses and did women-only actions [and] we felt very consciously that organising together and living together and learning... with just women was really important’, Sinéad told me, ‘separatism’—as practiced in and through several radical feminist spaces—‘was something that we, the anarchist feminists in Brixton, distinctly disagreed with’. Further, according to Sinéad, a guiding principle for many Rebel Dykes was that ‘We wanted to be outside the state... It was the state against us’; this meant that, broadly, in the Rebel Dykes scene, ‘there were two sort of acceptable ways of making a living: ... a manual trade, or sex work’. Both of these, she explained, were considered ‘ways to work outside the system... cash-in-hand sort of work’. Sex work was a key reason why the Rebel Dykes began having more and more clashes with radical feminists they had once shared space with in Greenham Common: ‘After [a fellow Rebel Dyke] and I started working peep shows... [women] we used to know from Greenham wouldn’t have anything to do with us, *at all*’, Demeter told me. ‘As far as they were concerned it was just, like, inexcusably bad’. With this in mind, the forms which the Rebel Dykes’ ‘ecosystem’ took must be understood in part as a response to, a refuge from, and as a rejection of the kinds of radical feminist politics, collective projects and squatted spaces examined by Wall (2017) and Tobin (2017a; 2017b). At stake here, then, is not only that feminist, lesbian and/or dyke communities, identifications and spaces (squatted and otherwise) cannot be romanticised as organic, natural and spontaneous but also that they are overdetermined by each other (Joseph 2002). Indeed, as Roberta told me: ‘A lot of us were ... dykes who felt not at home in the [broader] dyke [or lesbian] scene ... so we kind of created our own scene’.

Conclusion

The spaces, histories, dynamics and struggles presented here are not (or at least not simply) offered in the service of more diverse or more comprehensive accounts of feminism and squatting. The task, as I see it, is not to simply address gaps in dominant narratives of, for example, feminism by pointing to the anarchist feminism of the Rebel Dykes *as well as*, for example, to trans feminism or Black feminism, lesbian feminism or socialist feminism—as if these were simply given terms descriptive of an array of discrete, coherent feminisms. These terms index political positions, identifications and spaces which *exceed* them, in that they are always being negotiated and (re)constituted—it is *these* negotiations and their spatialities which demand to be explored. Similarly, with regard to histories and geographies of squatting, the task is not to simply point to the fact that lesbians squatted, or that different kinds of lesbians squatted, but to attend to *how* squatted spaces are created in relation to—and are constitutive of—subjectivities, politics and relationalities. In assembling a geography of the ‘Rebel Dykes’ scene—and drawing on literature on lesbian geographies—this article has explored a number of *processes* through which the Rebel Dykes—as a scene, a collective, a project—have come into being. In outlining the complex ways in which several Rebel Dykes understand, define and dis/identify with ‘lesbian’, with ‘dyke’ and/or with ‘queer’ and ‘bisexual’, it has contributed to

literature demonstrating how lesbian identities, histories and communities are formulated, negotiated, deployed and resisted in complex, shifting and specific spatial and temporal ways. Crucially, this article has shown that formulations of dyke, lesbian and feminist *make* place and space and are themselves *made* in and through place and space: It is, this article has argued, through the Rebel Dykes' spaces—through their *making*, through the possibilities they opened up—that the Rebel Dykes *became* the Rebel Dykes.

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Notes

- 1 'Squatting' is defined here as living in—or otherwise using—a building (or part of a building, such as an apartment) without the permission of the owner. Laws around squatting vary widely in the United Kingdom—see Miller [Bettocchi] (2021) for more.
- 2 The dyke fetish club night Chain Reaction—established in 1987 and held on Tuesday nights in what was, every other night of the week, a gay men's bar in Vauxhall called the Market Tavern—is an exception, as it is discussed extensively in the 2021 *Rebel Dykes* film (Abraham 2017; Fahey, Shanahan, and Williams 2021).
- 3 See Davis (2017), Dee (2014), Milligan (2016) and Wates (1976] 2014).
- 4 Notable exceptions to these tendencies include a *Feminist Review* article by Jayne Egerton (1990) on lesbian women's experiences of housing in 1980s London, which touches on some lesbian squats—alongside housing co-ops and housing associations—as examples of communal women-only households; they also include work by Gavin Brown (2007) and by Matt Cook (2013). Brown's ethnography of a range of queer autonomous spaces and

- events explores a Queeruption gathering which took place in a squatted east London tenement block in March 2002. Cook's work on the network of squats which became known in the 1970s as the Brixton Gay Community dwells on memory and on inclusions and exclusions at stake in attempts to create liberatory political communities. See also Miller [Bettocchi] (2022), which pieces together an affective and infrastructural geography of a 2014 squatted social centre in Brixton established by the queer, anti-racist, feminist squatting collective House of Brag.
- 5 Although several studies have documented experiments to create (often separatist) rural communal lesbian feminist spaces, rural spaces overall remain relatively underexplored in lesbian geographies (and geographies of sexualities more broadly) in comparison to the attention devoted to urban spaces (Browne and Ferreira 2015; Valentine 1997, 2000).
 - 6 Indeed, as Clare Forstie (2020) has noted, 'critiques of the coherence of lesbian identity have existed throughout the history of lesbian discourse' (1765); further, lesbian communities may be (and indeed, have been and are) 'composed of an array of sexual and gender identities: lesbian ... as well as bisexual, queer, pansexual, polyamorous, and other sexual identities, and transgender and cisgender women, transgender men, and genderqueer and nonbinary people' (1764).
 - 7 This kind of involvement might raise questions around critical distance. Drawing on feminist scholarship on questions of epistemology, here I cannot (nor do I wish to) claim a position of objective detachment or false neutrality—especially as such claims might, among other things, provide cover for extractive research dynamics (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Haraway 1988; Hemmings 2018; Rose 1997). The accounts and analyses presented here are offered as situated and partial; I have pursued not objectivity but *accountability*.
 - 8 See <https://twitter.com/RebelDykes/status/1170105793577988097>.

- 9 See <https://spacestationssixtyfive.com/2021/06/16/the-rebel-dykes-art-archive-show/>.
- 10 See Crook and Jeffries (2022) and Dunster (2022).
- 11 In this context, trans subjectivities and sex work are frequently understood as oppositional to feminism *tout court*; and radical feminism is conflated with *trans-exclusionary* radical feminism. Among other things, such framings obscure important political differences between traditions of radical feminism (some of which have long histories of queer and trans inclusivity); they also obscure vital imbrications of and resonances between trans, lesbian, queer, sex worker and feminist politics and projects—resonances and imbrications long inhabited and explored by the Rebel Dykes. See Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent (2020), Smith and Mac (2018) and Williams (2016).
- 12 In explicitly attending to these trajectories, the Rebel Dykes History Project can be understood not as seeking to recover and preserve discrete and static histories and geographies, but as grappling with the processes through which identities, collectivities and political projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated. Indeed, as feminist and queer engagements with archival practices have noted, archives are frequently where knowledge production *begins* (Eichhorn 2013) and where its subjects ‘put themselves together’, often by ‘collect[ing] or cobbl[ing] together ... understandings of sexuality and gender’ (Marshall, Murphy, and Tortorici 2014, 2). ‘History is only interesting for what it can do’, Fahey wrote with regard to the Rebel Dykes History Project in the 2019 zine *Dykes Ink*. ‘Rebel Dykes’ history has the potential to build community, and the archive is already doing that’ (Fahey 2019, 19). Such an approach opens up the archive as a potential space of activism; it also opens up the *urban* as an archive of contestation, ‘alert[ing] us to [the] (im)possibilities which are congealed in the very fabric of the city, its buildings, architectures, and infrastructures’ (Burgum 2022, 512; Cifor et al. 2018).
- 13 This deployment of ‘dyke’ resonates with those explored by Julie Podmore: According to her, ‘dyke’ has often been deployed to mark more confrontational and rebellious positionalities and politics than ‘lesbian’ was understood as marking in some contexts (Podmore 2015).
- 14 Roberta’s deployment of ‘dyke’ echoes deployments of ‘lesbian’ which signify a range of ‘woman-to-woman relationships, female support networks, a female and feminist value system’ and ‘woman-identified experience’, and ‘not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman’ (Rich 1980, 646–648). It also echoes deployments of ‘queer’ which encompass *non-normative* gendered and sexual practices and subjectivities of all kinds, even putatively heterosexual ones (Cohen 1997).
- 15 Demeter’s framing of ‘dyke’ with regard to ‘queer’ appears to echo, in some ways, common narratives which position feminist and lesbian politics and identifications as the *antecedent* of queer, or as *superseded* by it; narratives which position queer as the corrective, evolutionary extension of feminism and lesbianism (Jagose 1996; McBean 2016). ‘Queer’ appears to be positioned here as that which comes *after* ‘dyke’; as that which was not used because it didn’t *yet* exist. This reading is complicated, however, by the fact that Demeter *also* explicitly refused it, rejecting formulations of ‘queer’ which cast lesbianism and feminism as not only outdated and/or anachronistic, but as invariably essentialist and trans-exclusionary (Ahmed 2017; Browne and Ferreira 2015; Eichhorn 2013; Enke 2018; Hemmings 2011). She spoke to these dynamics during our interview: ‘I think what’s happened is that ... some of the queers have started to think that all lesbians are TERFs [trans-exclusive radical feminists]’ (see Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020 for more on this term). ‘It’s a shame’, she told me, ‘and it’s quite problematic. I was quite happy to call myself queer for ages, but if it’s sort of at the risk of kind of lesbians being made invisible, then I’ll go back to being a lesbian!’ [Laughs].
- 16 See footnote 15. In making this point, some of the Rebel Dykes also echoed Sara Ahmed’s observation that ‘[t]he bits and pieces from lesbian histories’ (or in this case, dyke histories) which are seen as *not* being ‘wet, straight and boring’ (to use Kris’s formulation) ‘become rewritten as a queer history, or a history of how queerness came to be’ rather than as a *lesbian* or a *dyke* history (Ahmed 2017, 223). Against possible subsumptions by queer, it is worth noting that, according to Podmore, ‘dyke’ has been deployed precisely as ‘radical and open enough to create space for the diversity of their counter-public but also limited enough to *make lesbians visible* as a movement in urban public space’ (2015, 81, emphasis added). Crucially, the relationship between ‘dyke’ and ‘woman’ cannot be presumed in the contexts which Podmore explores (or, indeed, in others):

- For example, a placard spotted by her at the 2012 Montréal Radical Dyke March read 'Not man, not woman, dyke damn it' (Podmore 2015).
- 17 According to social anthropologist Sheila Patterson, these newer residents of Brixton encountered a local council determined to 'persuad[e] local [white] ratepayers and voters that they were not ... discriminating against local [white] applicants in favour of recently arrived [Black] migrants' (Patterson 1965, 159).
 - 18 See Miller [Bettocchi] (2021).
 - 19 See Fisher (2012), Fryer ([1984] 2010) and Ramdin ([1987] 2017).
 - 20 In interviews, conversations and walking tours, Rebel Dykes recalled living in or spending significant amounts of time in squats on Arlingford Road (at number 13), Brailsford Road (at numbers 2, 13, 40 and 77), on Brixton Water Lane, on Josephine Avenue (at number 10), on Solon Road, on Trent Road (at number 63), and at multiple flats in Tulse Hill Estate (including in Holt House, Purser House and Laughton House) and Southwyck House.
 - 21 For more on this crèche, see issues no. 42, 44 and 45 of the mid-1980s zine *Crowbar* (*Crowbar* 1985a, 1985b; Some Mothers at the Brailsford Kids Group 1985).
 - 22 See Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent (2020) for more on this term.
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